'Since 1965, a hospital by and for our people'

By JAMES F. STILWELL 1963 Campaign Chairman

Editor’s note: This is the first of two part on the history of the Sky Lakes hospital which is marking its 50th anniversary this month. Part 2, which deals with recent history, will be printed Thursday.

Many think our hospital just emerged and has always been there, not realizing the pioneering spirit and generosity of our people that made it possible.

Since no history of the campaign to build the hospital has been written and further delay would jeopardize obtaining the story, this is being written to preserve that history.

It is impossible to give credit to all who worked and gave so generously. Of the original 800 volunteers who pledged their support, we are down to a precious few. Of the original 34 campaign leadership just two: Grant March, 103 and myself 95.

Bill Sweetland, Herald and News editor recognized our plight and gave us great support.

Our local business owners, lumber companies, Southern Pacific and Great Northern Railroad were outstanding in their support as were our farmers and ranchers.

Our women held all kinds of money-raising projects, baked goods, quilt sales.

Our schools and children entered into the spirit of giving.

Our service clubs and churches were most supportive and giving.

Our air base (now Kingsley Field) personnel, were most generous.
Spirit of individuals

These workers and communities responded with a tenacity of purpose. They would not take no for an answer. I so well recall a group of women who each month brought their meager Social Security checks into my office — the widows’ might personified.

There was an unquenchable spirit on the part of our people.

The following are some of the high points of my recollections of the campaign to build our hospital.

Our Chamber of Commerce and business leaders knew if the Klamath Basin was to grow we must have a stronger hospital presence.

The Klamath Valley Hospital, (now offices) on Pine Street was built in 1920. The Hillside Hospital (now a church) on the corner of Pacific Terrace and Crater Lake Parkway in 1929 served our people.

Large commitment of time

In 1961, the Chamber of Commerce Hospital Committee received authorization from the Presbytery of Southwestern Oregon to proceed with a non-monetary sponsorship. The name Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital was used as a working title for the campaign.

In 1962, Greer Drew, long-time friend and Chamber member asked if I would accept the challenge to serve as General Campaign Chairman to raise $725,000 as the Basin’s portion to build a new hospital costing $2,958,000. The balance was to come from federal Hill-Burton Funds and a $900,000 mortgage.

I asked for time to think about the task, as the Basin had never undertaken a building project of this size. At the time I did not realize I was committing 15 months to the job.

Joe Hicks, originator of Klamath Medical Service Bureau and long-time friend came by soon after Greer’s visit. I mentioned the new hospital.

Joe questioned the need for it and bet we couldn’t raise $250,000. This was what I needed to hear.
I listed the reasons why we must have better medical facilities: Our hospitals were obsolete. If we couldn’t raise $725,000, I would accept a job offer from my friend John Olin, president and CEO of Olin-Matheson, Squibb Pharmaceutical and Winchester Arms of St. Louis and hopefully return one day and build a hospital for my town.

Joe later said he lost the bet and gave generously. We were both winners.

I called Greer and accepted the challenge and asked if I could select whom I would like to serve with me. Greer assured me I would have full power, subject to their acceptance.

The community was divided as to the need of a new hospital and more so because of the $725,000 figure. If they contributed and we failed, what would happen to their money?

I asked Dick Henzel, Eston (Mike) Balsiger to serve as vice chairmen and Andrew (Andy) Collier to chair corporate gifts. They accepted with no questions. These were great men, as were all of those who worked so diligently.

With the capable guidance of Dave Hanaman of the American City Bureau and our Patsy Beck and longest associate of our hospital, we set to work.

**Banks prodded to give**

For many weeks we met in my office going over plans as to how to proceed. We formed teams of those who knew the prospects to be called on. We knew early on that we must be prudent in our suggestions for contributions.

As chairman, my job was to explain to the communities and workers that we must have a new hospital if the Basin was to survive. The hospital would serve as a monument of our efforts to future generations. Our people listened, worked and gave.

In the beginning, the going was most difficult and we encountered many disappointments and some rather humorous ones. Many nights I questioned what I might have gotten myself and supporters into, or what would I do in St. Louis, if I were to relocate.

Many contentious and heated meetings were held in my office. Some of our doctors were stockholders in the Klamath Medical Service Bureau and believed the new hospital would jeopardize their investment.
We knew we must establish a basis for contributions from corporate entities. We wrote our two national banks asking for their support and were disappointed to receive rather modest checks.

We knew if we accepted these amounts, from major donors, the project would fail. We returned the checks with a well-written letter, signed by community leaders and promptly received checks for two and a half the original amounts. This took courage and the banks benefited.